

Concern Rises After Former Public Art Is Sold

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By Sean P. Thomas

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DTLA - In general, art auctions in New York City have little impact on life in Downtown Los Angeles. But a pair of recent multi-million dollar sales have raised the hackles of some local figures, and have sparked concerns about the future of public art.

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On May 15, Christie's Auction House sold "La caresse d'un oiseau" by the late Spanish artist Joan Miró for \$9.4 million. Two days later, the auction house fetched \$2.3 million for "Le Dandy," by French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet.

The two sculptures had stood inside the atrium of the Wells Fargo Center on Bunker Hill since the mid-1980s. Landowner Brookfield Office Properties removed them last December when it began a \$60 million transformation of the space at the base of the Grand Avenue office towers.

Concern has arisen because the sculptures were part of a mandated public art program initiated in the 1980s by the now-defunct Community Redevelopment Agency. As part of an agreement to receive financial assistance or incentives from the CRA, developers were required to set aside 1% of a project's budget for a public art component. Sometimes this was satisfied through a performance series. Other times, artworks were commissioned or acquired and were put on display.

News of the sale of the former Downtown artworks was first widely disseminated in a May 15 story by the Los Angeles Times' Christopher Knight.

The maneuvering has Donald Spivack, the former Deputy Chief of Operations at the CRA, concerned about what it means for other public artworks in Downtown, specifically on Bunker Hill.

"If the [property owners] don't want it, it should either revert to the city or revert to some institution so that we can keep it in the public domain," Spivack said.

When the complex, originally dubbed Crocker Center, was being constructed, the developers spent a portion of the \$400 million budget on the Miró and Dubuffet works, in addition to pieces by Louise Nevelson, Nancy Graves, Robert Graham, and a two-level atrium designed by architect Lawrence Halprin.

Wells Fargo merged with Crocker Bank in 1986, and Brookfield acquired the property in 2013. The works remained on display until Brookfield began the atrium overhaul.

Spivack said that he began to question Brookfield as to whether the removal of the works was permanent or if they were going to be reinstalled at a later date. He was told it would be permanent, but that was before he learned that the next step would be putting the works on the auction block.

Brookfield has not broken any rules by selling the works. As part of the original CRA agreement, the title to the artworks fell into the hands of the company in 2014, following the expiration of a 30-year contract signed by the original developers in 1984.

When reached by a reporter, Brookfield representatives did not specifically address the sale of the artworks. The company instead released a statement, saying, "From New York to London to Downtown Los Angeles, Brookfield has a long and deep commitment to public art. Following the game-changing renovation of the Wells Fargo Center atrium and plaza, to be renamed Halo, ArtsBrookfield, one of the largest privately-funded arts programs in the world, will lead a vibrant, rotating arts and culture program in the heart of DTLA's burgeoning arts and culture corridor. We expect to share more about our plans closer to Halo's opening in 2019."

It is unknown what Brookfield plans to do with the other works put on display through the CRA process. The company declined requests for further comment.

Spivack said that selling the art for private gain isn't what the CRA expected would occur once the contract expired. Instead, he said, there was a hope that that the works would remain accessible to the public, be moved to another location, or be donated in a manner that allowed for public exposure.

Julie Silliman, a former head of the CRA's art program, questioned how hard Brookfield tried to find a public outlet for the works.

"Even though it happens to be private land, if you don't want to reuse the piece for some reason, there are alternatives," she said. "If I had still been working at the CRA, I would have tried to see if they could have donated it for a tax write off."

She pointed to the example of a deal involving AEG (the owner of Staples Center) and the CRA in 2007. It involved moving an artwork dubbed "Untitled Four," by Los Angeles-based artist Mark Lere, from in front of the arena to the USC campus. That allowed AEG to install more statues of sports luminaries at the South Park venue.

"USC got a work of art, Staples Center got more space to do more commemorative sculptures, and everyone was happy," Silliman said.

Spivack said another possibility was that one of the nearby museums on Bunker Hill could acquire the pieces before they hit the auction block. Spivack said both the Museum of Contemporary Art and Wilshire Boulevard's Los Angeles County Museum of Art were contacted about the artworks.

Representative of those institutions did not respond to requests for comment by Los Angeles Downtown News.

Silliman and Spivack both noted that with Gov. Jerry Brown's dissolution of CRAs across the state in 2012, no one is keeping a watchful eye on the art. They are concerned that other public pieces will also disappear in the future.

Silliman said that records previously kept by the CRA are slowly being discarded, making it harder to track works originally initiated by the agency.

"We're powerless," Silliman said. "We're no longer working for the CRA. We're just individual citizens now."

Felicia Filer, public art division director with the city Department of Cultural Affairs, said in a statement that the auction of the Miró and the Dubuffet are "unfortunate."

"We are working with the CRA/LA to ensure the former agency's art program remains in the public realm for decades to come," she said in the statement, "including orphaned public artwork on the city property and in the public right of way."

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